National Endowment for the Arts

TEACHER'S GUIDE

THE BIG READ

FINGERBONE
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INSTITUTE of Museum and Library SERVICES

MARILYNNE ROBINSON'S

Housekeeping

NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
FOR THE ARTS

THE BIG READ

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Housekeeping

TEACHER'S GUIDE

NATIONAL
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FOR THE ARTS
A great nation
deserves great art.

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HOUSEKEEPING

> **"Having a sister or a friend is like sitting at night in a lighted house. Those outside can watch you if they want, but you need not see them."**
>
> —from *Housekeeping*

Introduction

Welcome to The Big Read, a major initiative from the National Endowment for the Arts designed to revitalize the role of literary reading in American culture. The Big Read hopes to unite communities through great literature, as well as inspire students to become life-long readers.

This Big Read Teacher's Guide contains ten lessons to lead you through Marilynne Robinson's classic novel, *Housekeeping*. Each lesson has four sections: a focus topic, discussion activities, writing exercises, and homework assignments. In addition, we have provided capstone projects and suggested essay topics, as well as handouts with more background information about the novel, the historical period, and the author. All lessons dovetail with the state language arts standards required in the fiction genre.

The Big Read teaching materials also include a CD. Packed with interviews, commentaries, and excerpts from the book, The Big Read CD presents firsthand accounts of why *Housekeeping* remains so compelling more than a quarter-century after its initial publication. Some of America's most celebrated writers, scholars, and actors have volunteered their time to make Big Read CDs exciting additions to the classroom.

Finally, The Big Read Reader's Guide deepens your exploration with interviews, booklists, timelines, and historical information. We hope this guide and syllabus allow you to have fun with your students while introducing them to the work of a great American author.

From the NEA, we wish you an exciting and productive school year.

Dana Gioia

Dana Gioia
Chairman, National Endowment for the Arts

Suggested Teaching Schedule

1

Day One

FOCUS: Biography

Activities: Listen to The Big Read CD. Read the biography (pp. 5–6) and the interview excerpt (pp. 10–11) in the *Housekeeping* Reader's Guide. Collectively review the key points of Robinson's biography. Write about a childhood place of mystery and discovery.

Homework: Read Chapter 1 (pp. 3–28).*

2

Day Two

FOCUS: Culture and History

Activities: Read and discuss Handout One. Discuss the role of women in the 1950s and how women are portrayed in the novel's first chapter. Write a short essay about a historical artifact or event that is interwoven with your family history.

Homework: Read Chapters 2 and 3 (pp. 29–59).

3

Day Three

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

Activities: Read and discuss Handout Two. Read aloud and discuss an excerpt of the ice-skating scene in Chapter 2. Write a description of the narrator.

Homework: Read Chapter 4 (pp. 60–75).

4

Day Four

FOCUS: Characters

Activities: Discuss the flood scene in Chapter 4. Discuss and write about characters and the concept of family traits.

Homework: Read Chapter 5 (pp. 76–94).

5

Day Five

FOCUS: Figurative Language

Activities: Examine the extended metaphor (Fingerbone "relics") on p. 73. Ask the students to discuss what is being compared. Write a paragraph using figurative language to describe a complex emotion.

Homework: Read Chapter 6 (pp. 95–108).

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* Page numbers refer to the Picador 2004 edition of *Housekeeping*.

6

Day Six

FOCUS: Symbols

Activities: Read aloud the scene depicting Sylvie on the bridge (pp. 80–84), and the section where Ruth and Lucille stop going to school and spend time at the bridge (pp. 95–97). Write about why and how the bridge functions as a symbol in the novel.

Homework: Read Chapter 7 (pp. 109–142).

7

Day Seven

FOCUS: Character Development

Activities: Read and discuss Handout Three. Analyze and discuss the dynamics of Sylvie, Ruth, and Lucille's household. Write letters in Ruth and Lucille's voices.

Homework: Read Chapter 8 (pp. 143–175).

8

Day Eight

FOCUS: The Plot Unfolds

Activities: Use the filmmaking technique of storyboarding to map the plot of the first eight chapters.

Homework: Read Chapter 9 (pp. 176–191).

9

Day Nine

FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Activities: Discuss, analyze, and write about the central theme of housekeeping.

Homework: Read Chapters 10 and 11 (pp. 192–219).

10

Day Ten

FOCUS: What Makes a Book Great?

Activities: Explore the qualities of a great novel. Write essays examining personal reactions to the novel.

Homework: Select an essay topic and write a thesis statement.

Lesson One

FOCUS: Biography

Examining an author's life can inform and expand the reader's understanding of a novel. Biographical criticism is the practice of analyzing a literary work through the lens of an author's experience. In this lesson, explore the author's life to understand the novel more fully.

A primordial landscape of mountains and cold, glacial waters made an indelible impression on Marilynne Robinson, who grew up in Sandpoint, Idaho, in the 1940s. Sandpoint's large and majestic Lake Pend Oreille was a source of childhood fascination and family tragedy for Robinson, whose maternal uncle drowned in its waters before she was born. As an undergraduate she studied American literature and religion at Pembroke College (Brown University). On a dare from her roommate, Robinson took a writing workshop with the postmodernist writer John Hawkes, who encouraged her to have confidence in the ornate language, complex sentences, and extended metaphors that characterize her writing style. She has often said that *Housekeeping* (1980) began as a collection of metaphors. Eventually, the lake of her childhood became a powerful central image in the novel.

Discussion Activities

Listen to The Big Read CD. Read the Reader's Guide biography of Robinson (pp. 5–6) and the interview excerpt (pp. 10–11). Students should take notes. Collectively review the key points of Robinson's biography. Ask students to share any questions or thoughts they will carry with them as they begin to read.

Writing Exercise

In the Reader's Guide interview, Robinson explains that many of the dramatic moments of her childhood involved the Idaho landscape, particularly the lake. "It's like the local spirit of the place," she explains, "and we spent a lot of time just hovering on the edges of it, looking at it and dipping into it." Ask the students to recall a place of discovery, experimentation, mystery, or wonder from their own childhoods, and to write a short essay describing this place and the thoughts and feelings it evokes. Some useful prompts might include: What drew you to this place? What about it intrigued, scared, or thrilled you? What did you learn there, and what remains a mystery?

Homework

Read Chapter 1 (pp. 3–28). Students should list the characters they encounter, and return to class prepared to discuss the key events of Ruth's family history, described in Chapter 1.

Lesson Two

FOCUS: Culture and History

Cultural and historical contexts give birth to the dilemmas and themes at the center of the novel. Studying these contexts and appreciating intricate details of the time and place help readers understand the motivations of the characters.

Set in the 1950s, *Housekeeping* contains no references to specific years or significant national events. The vagueness of time and lack of news from the larger world contribute to the novel's powerful sense of place: the northern Idaho wilderness. The fictional town of Fingerbone has much in common with Robinson's childhood home of Sandpoint, Idaho, including a spectacular railway bridge suspended over a broad expanse of cold water. The building of railroads brought new economic opportunities and waves of job-seeking immigrants to remote settlements in the Northwest and carried away the enormous timber harvests of the northern forests. In the novel, the presence of hoboes and transients suggests that the 1930s Dust Bowl era is not long in the past, even as Lucille studies hairstyles and chats with older girls over Cokes at the drug store, quintessential teen rituals of the 1950s.

Discussion Activities

Read and discuss Handout One: Construction of the Sandpoint Railroad Bridge. As a class, discuss the role of women during the 1950s. Does the first chapter portray women differently than the stereotype? If so, how?

Writing Exercise

Ruth's and Lucille's history is interwoven with the history of American railroads: References to their grandfather's railroad job, the spectacular train disaster, and Aunt Sylvie's boxcar travels are embedded in the larger family story. Ask each student to write a short essay about a historic artifact or event that is entwined with his or her family story. How do the artifacts or events they have chosen connect their family histories to the larger events of history?

Homework

Read Chapters 2 and 3 (pp. 29–59). Answer these questions in writing: What is life like for Ruthie and Lucille after the arrival of Lily and Nona? Why do Lily and Nona decide to compose a letter to Sylvie? Why do the girls follow Sylvie on her morning walk?

Lesson Three

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

The narrator tells the story, with a specific perspective informed by his or her beliefs and experiences. Narrators can be major or minor characters, or exist outside the story altogether. The narrator weaves her or his point of view, including ignorance and bias, into telling the tale. A first-person narrator participates in the events of the novel, using "I." A distanced narrator, often not a character, is removed from the action of the story and uses the third-person (he, she, and they). The distanced narrator may be omniscient, able to read the minds of all the characters, or limited, describing only certain characters' thoughts and feelings. Ultimately, the type of narrator determines the point of view from which the story is told.

Housekeeping is narrated in the first person by Ruth, who announces her identity, and, in a sense, her sole authority over the story, in the first sentence of the novel: *My name is Ruth*. She narrates the story of her unsteady childhood in an extended flashback. Throughout the narrative, she refers to herself by her childhood nickname, "Ruthie." The story is told from an adult point of view but offers no hint of Ruth's adult life until late in the book, when she reveals that she is a drifter who returns now and then to her childhood home but sees only what is visible of it from a boxcar.

Discussion Activities

Read and discuss Handout Two: First-person Narration in *Housekeeping*. Read aloud the ice-skating scene in Chapter 2. Begin on page 33: "For some reason the lake was a source of particular pleasure..." and end on page 35 with the paragraph that begins "If every house in Fingerbone were to fall before our eyes."

Writing Exercise

Pretending that you have only the brief fragment of narrative discussed in the section above from which to work, write a description of the narrator. What can you know about her from the sights and sounds she describes? What holds her attention? What are her feelings about the lake, the town, and life in general? Each specific detail, word choice, or repetition constitutes a clue. (If you prefer, students can work in small groups.)

Homework

Read Chapter 4 (pp. 60–75). Why does Sylvie's behavior during the flood make Ruthie and Lucille anxious? What is Lucille's complaint during the flood? What is Sylvie's response?

Lesson Four

FOCUS: Characters

The central character in a work of literature is called the protagonist. The protagonist usually initiates the main action of the story and often overcomes a flaw, such as weakness or ignorance, to achieve a new understanding by the work's end. A protagonist who acts with great honor or courage may be called a hero. An antihero is a protagonist lacking these qualities. Instead of being dignified, brave, idealistic, or purposeful, the antihero may be cowardly, self-interested, or weak. The protagonist's journey is enriched by encounters with characters who hold differing beliefs. One such character type, a foil, has traits that contrast with the protagonist's and highlight important features of the main character's personality. The most important foil, the antagonist, opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success.

The characters in *Housekeeping* share a house and a familial legacy. The dynamics of character interaction are especially rich when characters share family traits and sometimes act out intergenerational dramas. Although Ruthie is clearly the novel's protagonist, Lucille is often the instigator of action. She also serves as Ruthie's antagonist in later scenes, challenging her to reject Sylvie and "improve" herself. "Families are a sorrow, and that's the truth," one of the ladies of Fingerbone says (p. 186). For Ruthie, the truth and sorrow of her family is splintered across several generations.

Discussion Activities

Discuss the flood scene in Chapter 4. What do we learn about Ruthie, Lucille, and Sylvie? How does the family history shape the girls' expectations and suspicions about Sylvie? Read aloud and discuss the section on p. 74 beginning: "The restoration of the town was..." until the end of page 75. Discuss the concept of family patterns.

Writing Exercise

Ruthie says, "Then, too, for whatever reasons, our whole family was standoffish. This was the fairest description of our best qualities, and the kindest description of our worst faults" (p. 74). Have students write several paragraphs analyzing this passage. Given the family history, what are some reasons why they might be "standoffish"? How can a character flaw also be a strength?

Homework

Read Chapter 5 (pp. 76–94). What is Sylvie doing when they encounter her at the shore? How do the girls react to what they've seen? How does Sylvie's housekeeping transform the house?

Lesson Five

FOCUS: Figurative Language

Writers use figurative language such as imagery, similes, and metaphors to help the reader visualize and experience events and emotions in a story. Imagery—a word or phrase that refers to sensory experience (sight, sound, smell, touch, or taste)—helps create a physical experience for the reader and adds immediacy to literary language.

Some figurative language asks us to stretch our imaginations, finding the likeness in seemingly unrelated things. Simile is a comparison of two things that initially seem quite different but are shown to have significant resemblance. Similes employ connective words, usually "like," "as," "than," or a verb such as "resembles." A metaphor is a statement that one thing is something else that, in a literal sense, it is not. By asserting that a thing is something else, a metaphor creates a close association that underscores an important similarity between these two things.

Robinson's use of figurative language in *Housekeeping* is extensive and elemental. The language Ruth uses to describe her experiences is layered with images, similes, and metaphors that reveal her unique way of perceiving the world.

Discussion Activities

Sometimes authors develop, or extend, a metaphor beyond one sentence. Examine the extended metaphor (Fingerbone "relics") on p. 73. Ask the students to discuss what is being compared. What is the source of the imagery Ruth uses? Why would she choose this metaphor to describe Fingerbone after the flood? What does Ruth mean by the statement, "Every spirit passing through the world fingers the tangible and mars the mutable, and finally has come to look and not to buy." How does it connect to Ruth's thoughts about the flood?

Writing Exercise

Figurative language can illuminate a complex idea or emotion, as when Ruth describes what it feels like to eat lunch alone at school: "It seemed as if I were trying to eat a peanut-butter sandwich while hanging by the neck" (p. 136). Ask students to remember a situation in which they experienced strong or mixed feelings that seemed difficult to put into words. Write a paragraph about that situation using figurative language to describe their feelings.

Homework

Read Chapter 6 (pp. 95–108). What do the woods represent to Ruthie and Lucille? How do their feelings differ?

Lesson Six

FOCUS: Symbols

Symbols are persons, places, or things in a narrative that have significance beyond a literal understanding. The craft of storytelling depends on symbols to present ideas and point toward new meanings. Most frequently, a specific object will be used to refer to (or symbolize) a more abstract concept. The repeated appearance of an object suggests a non-literal, or figurative, meaning attached to the object. Symbols are often found in the book's title, at the beginning and end of the story, within a profound action, or in the name or personality of a character. The life of a novel is perpetuated by generations of readers interpreting and re-interpreting the main symbols. By identifying and understanding symbols, readers can reveal new interpretations of the novel.

In *Housekeeping*, the lake and woods, the railroad bridge, and the house are charged with symbolic meaning for Ruth, who associates them consciously and subconsciously with the defining events of her past. She haunts these places in search of self-knowledge, declaring that "everything must finally be made comprehensible" (p. 92).

Discussion Activities

In the novel, Ruthie, Lucille, and Sylvie spend many hours at the lake. A place of mystery, "the lightless, airless waters" suggest the constant presence of death in life. Ruth's grandfather and mother plunge into it and die, yet, paradoxically, the lake elicits memories that keep the dead alive. Working with the students, analyze several descriptions of the lake (including pp. 9, 112, and 192–194). Discuss how and why the lake functions as a symbol in the novel.

Writing Exercise

Read aloud the scene depicting Sylvie on the bridge (pp. 80–84) and the section where Ruthie and Lucille stop going to school and spend time at the bridge (pp. 95–97). Have students analyze and write a few paragraphs about why and how the bridge functions as a symbol in the novel. Helpful prompts might include: Why are Ruthie and Lucille alarmed by Sylvie's presence on the bridge? What happened on the bridge earlier in the novel? What does Sylvie mean when she says, "I've always wondered what it would be like"? Do the bridge and lake, as symbols, relate to each other? Have volunteers share their finished pieces with the class.

Homework

Read Chapter 7 (pp. 109–142). Make a list of key events in the chapter, and note in detail Lucille's changes in attitude and behavior.

Lesson Seven

FOCUS: Character Development

Novels trace the development of characters who encounter a series of challenges. Most characters contain a complex balance of virtues and vices. Internal and external forces require characters to question themselves, overcome fears, or reconsider dreams. The protagonist may undergo profound change. A close study of character development maps, in each character, the evolution of motivation, personality, and belief. The tension between a character's strengths and weaknesses keeps the reader guessing about what might happen next and the protagonist's eventual success or failure.

In the earliest chapters of *Housekeeping*, Ruthie is always in the company of her younger sister, Lucille. The sisters are nearly inseparable; they exist as a single entity, Helen's orphaned girls, referred to by Lily and Nona as "poor things" (p. 32). But as they grow, the author reveals differences in their developing characters. Ruthie is accepting and reflective about the chaotic life that unfolds after her grandmother's death. Lucille is more critical and demanding. "It'll be all right," Ruthie says to her, when Aunt Sylvie appears to be running away after only one night in Fingerbone. "I know it'll be all right, but it makes me mad," Lucille replies (pp. 55–56). In an ironic reversal, Lucille and Ruthie, who as children had been "almost as a single consciousness" (p. 98), suffer irreconcilable differences as teenagers. Lucille challenges Ruthie's placid acceptance of Sylvie's ways and eventually moves out, destabilizing Ruthie's life once again.

Discussion Activities

Read and discuss Handout Three: Family Dynamics in *Housekeeping*. Analyze and discuss the dynamics of Sylvie, Ruthie, and Lucille's household. What does each character want from the others? Do they change to accommodate each other? If so, how?

Writing Exercise

Ask half the students to write a letter in Lucille's voice to Ruth, explaining why Lucille left home. Ask the other half to write a letter in Ruth's voice to Lucille, explaining why she should return home.

Homework

Read Chapter 8 (pp. 143–175). What is the reason for the visit to the abandoned house in the valley? What sensations, thoughts, and feelings does Ruthie experience there? Is the abandoned house similar to the Foster house?

Lesson Eight

FOCUS: The Plot Unfolds

The author crafts a plot structure to create expectations, increase suspense, and develop characters. The pacing of events can make a novel either predictable or riveting. Foreshadowing and flashbacks allow the author to defy the constraints of time. Sometimes an author can confound a simple plot by telling stories within stories. In a conventional work of fiction, the peak of the story's conflict—the climax—is followed by the resolution, or denouement, in which the aftereffects of that climactic action are presented.

A number of events (the train disaster, the disappearances of Molly, Helen, and Sylvie) occur before Ruthie's birth, yet they echo profoundly throughout the novel. The reader is always aware of the influence of the past on the unfolding plot. Just as the novel contains stories within stories, it also contains journeys within journeys, as Ruth visits and revisits symbolic places on her quest for meaning and self-discovery.

Discussion and Writing Activities

Use the filmmaking technique of storyboarding to map the plot of the first eight chapters. Have the students identify major plot elements. Use colored markers and a large sheet of paper from an easel pad for each plot turn. Take turns drawing scenes (stick figures are fine) and writing short summary statements for each one. Examples: *Ruth recounts her grandfather's death; Ruth recounts her grandmother's life as a widow; Helen commits suicide; Ruthie and Lucille grow up with their grandmother; Grandmother dies; Lily and Nona take up housekeeping.* Ask the students to note stories within stories and subplots in boxes along the bottom of each page. Number each element. Display them in order around the room.

Homework

Read Chapter 9 (pp. 176–191). Why do the ladies of Fingerbone come to the house? How does Sylvie characterize her relationship with Ruthie when she speaks to the ladies? How does Sylvie's behavior change at the end of the chapter?

Lesson Nine

FOCUS:

Themes of the Novel

Themes are the central, recurring subjects of a novel. As characters grapple with circumstances such as racism, class, or unrequited love, profound questions will arise in the reader's mind about human life, social pressures, and societal expectations. Classic themes include intellectual freedom versus censorship, the relationship between one's personal moral code and larger political justice, and spiritual faith versus rational considerations. A novel often reconsiders these age-old debates by presenting them in new contexts or from new points of view.

Discussion and Writing Activities

Robinson announces the central theme of the book in the title: *Housekeeping.* The theme is known from the outset, but her treatment of it quickly transcends all ordinary associations with the concept. The novel might be described as a meditation on the meaning of housekeeping, from its most ordinary aspects to its farthest metaphorical potential: How does one make a home in the world? Explore this theme through the following questions and exercises:

1. What does housekeeping mean to Grandmother Sylvia? What advice does she offer the girls (Example: "Sell the orchards," p. 27)? How do Lily and Nona view their housekeeping responsibilities?
2. Review the descriptions of Sylvie's housekeeping (including pp. 84–85, 99–103, and 180–181). Have students create a collective list of her housekeeping habits.
3. Discuss: How do Sylvie's habits differ from traditional ideas of housekeeping? What sort of meals does she prefer (p. 87)? How does she disregard the traditional boundaries between indoors and outdoors? Why? What insight can the reader gain about Sylvie's housekeeping from the stories she tells? How do the rituals of housekeeping relate to the keeping and nurturing of family and family bonds? How does the author feel about the human project of "keeping house" in a world where all living things perish eventually?
4. Work with students to create a list of other themes in the novel (for example, abandonment, loneliness, and transience). Have students choose one theme and write a short essay describing how one or more characters express this theme in words and actions. Students should support their ideas with examples from the text.

Homework

Read Chapters 10 and 11 (pp. 192–219). Why can Ruth no longer imagine going into the house (p. 203)? What insights does Ruth have in the orchard? Why do Ruth and Sylvie set the house on fire? What is Ruth's answer to her own question: "When did I become so unlike other people?" (p. 214).

10

Lesson Ten

FOCUS: What Makes a Book Great?

Great stories articulate and explore the mysteries of our daily lives in the larger context of the human struggle. The writer's voice, style, and use of language inform the plot, characters, and themes. By creating opportunities to learn, imagine, and reflect, a great novel is a work of art that affects many generations of readers, changes lives, challenges assumptions, and breaks new ground.

Discussion Activities

Ask students to make a list of the characteristics of a great book. Write these on the board. What elevates a novel to greatness? Then ask them to discuss, in groups, other books that include some of these characteristics. Do any of these books remind them of *Housekeeping*? Is this a great novel?

A great writer can be the voice of a generation. What kind of voice does Marilynne Robinson create in *Housekeeping*?

Writing Exercise

Ask students to write a short essay exploring their personal reactions to *Housekeeping*. Students should go beyond expressing like or dislike. Ask them to make a list of emotions they felt while reading the novel, and to examine why. Which characters and scenes did they relate to, and which remained strange or difficult to comprehend? Was the resolution of the novel satisfying? Comforting? Disturbing? Why?

Homework

Select an essay topic, or have students choose from the list of Essay Topics provided in this guide. Ask students to come to the next class with a draft of their thesis for the essay.

Essay Topics

The discussion activities and writing exercises in this guide provide you with possible essay topics, as do the Discussion Questions in the Reader's Guide. Advanced students can come up with their own essay topics, as long as they are specific and compelling. Other ideas for essays are provided here.

For essays, students should organize their ideas around a thesis about the novel. This statement or thesis should be focused, with clear reasons supporting its conclusion. The thesis and supporting reasons should be backed by references to the text.

1. If you were in Ruthie and Lucille's situation, would you choose to live with Miss Royce, or cross the bridge with Sylvie? Explain in detail why you would choose one lifestyle and reject the other. What is Lucille seeking by choosing an orderly, conventional life? What are the advantages and disadvantages of her choice? What has Ruth gained and what has she lost in choosing a transient life? Support your opinions with passages from the text.
2. Analyze the symbolic role of the house in the novel. Describe what it represents to various characters in the novel (Edmund Foster, Sylvia Foster, Ruthie, Lucille, Sylvie, and the women of the town). On pages 152–159, Ruth describes her thoughts as she explores the abandoned homestead on the island. What does Ruth mean when she says, "the appearance of relative solidity in my grandmother's house was deceptive"? Why does she say "it is better to have nothing"? Why do Sylvie and Ruth try to burn down the house?
3. In the final chapter of the novel, Ruthie and Sylvie cross the bridge to escape Fingerbone. "I believe it was the crossing of the bridge that changed me finally," Ruth says (p. 215). How and why is this a symbolic crossing? For Ruth, what is the purpose of the crossing, and what is being crossed? What subject does she dwell on while crossing the bridge? What, in a symbolic sense, is she leaving behind, escaping, or liberating herself from?
4. Ruth's imagination is extravagant, and she is constantly looking for meaningful patterns in the world. Carefully select three or four revealing passages that describe Ruth's inner thoughts. What does each reveal about her concerns, hopes, and fears? What does her language tell you about her background? How do certain word choices reveal the way she sees the world? Create a written portrait of Ruth, using the passages as evidence to support your ideas.

Capstone Projects

Teachers may consider the ways in which these activities may be linked to other Big Read community events. Most of these projects could be shared at a local library, student assembly, or bookstore.

1. Read and discuss the following description of Fingerbone:

   > The people of Fingerbone and its environs were very much given to murder. And it seemed that for every pitiable crime there was an appalling accident. What with the lake and the railroads, and what with blizzards and floods and barn fires and forest fires and the general availability of shotguns and bear traps and homemade liquor and dynamite, what with the prevalence of loneliness and religion and the rages and ecstasies they induce, and the closeness of families, violence was inevitable. (pp. 176–177)

   Marilynne Robinson has acknowledged that her hometown of Sandpoint, Idaho, was a model for Fingerbone. Using PowerPoint, work as a team to produce a historical slideshow of Sandpoint during the 1940's and 1950's. Have students research topics such as logging and mining, hunting, weather (Was there a real flood? Fires? A snowstorm that caused houses to collapse?), railroads and railroad bridges (Was there a railroad bridge? A train accident? Does the bridge still exist?), Lake Pend Oreille; cultural/social life in town, etc. The goal might be for each student to create two or three slides for his or her topic. Students should include photographs, music, and spoken word (with appropriate permissions). The Bonner County Historical Society, Sandpoint web site, and *Sandpoint Magazine* archives are possible resources. The finished slideshow could be presented at Big Read discussions or events around the community or displayed in the public library or another community site.

2. Plan an evening of readings from *Housekeeping.* A local coffee shop that hosts open mike events might make a nice venue. Help interested students select sections of the novel to prepare as dramatic readings or monologues. Arrange for a drama coach or actors from a local theatre company to help students prepare their selections. (A local theatre company might be interested in partnering with your students and participating in this event, giving students a chance to work with seasoned actors.) Plan ahead and publicize your event.

3. Ask a historian, folklore expert, or storyteller to give a presentation on tramps, hoboes, and boxcar drifters associated with the railroads and the Dust Bowl era. Or take the class to the local library or historical society to see photographs and artifacts related to railroad folklore. Arrange with staff ahead of time to have a variety of materials available.

4. After students have read the novel, arrange for the class to watch the 1987 film version of *Housekeeping*, written and directed by Bill Forsyth. Before watching the movie, have the class read the brief essay on the film in the Reader's Guide (p. 9). Afterward, discuss the film in relation to the novel. What aspects of the novel did the film illuminate? How did the characters compare to those in the novel? Does the film succeed in presenting the essence of the story of *Housekeeping?* If so, how?

Construction of the Sandpoint Railroad Bridge

Sylvie and I walked the whole black night across the railroad bridge at Fingerbone—a very long bridge, as you know if you have seen it.
—from *Housekeeping,* p. 216

Author Marilynne Robinson grew up in Idaho watching trains traverse the Sandpoint railroad bridge, a long, dramatic span of track suspended over the deep waters of Lake Pend Oreille. Forty trains each day now pass through Sandpoint, but imagine how vast and impenetrable the Idaho wilderness must have seemed when surveyors for the Northern Pacific Railroad arrived in the 1850s. Before the railroad arrived, travelers to the area relied on Indian trails, and the town of Sandpoint didn't exist. The first railroad bridge was built in 1882, as part of a three-hundred-mile segment of track constructed west from Heron, Montana to Wallula, Washington. The original bridge, updated in 1905, was constructed with wooden pilings and ties cut from virgin timber harvested from the surrounding forests.

In Eugene Virgil Smalley's extraordinary *History of the Northern Pacific Railroad,* published in 1883, the building of the bridge itself is reported as somewhat less arduous than the construction of track leading up to the shores of Lake Pend Oreille:

> As the railroad approaches Lake Pend Oreille from the west, the country becomes broken with ridges and deep ravines, and much trestle and piling is required. Within three miles of the lake there are three trestles—one 2,000 feet long, one 1,400 feet, and one 1,300 feet.

The work was performed by several thousand men, Smalley noted, "in spite of heavy snow-falls." There were no settlements along the construction path east of Spokane. All supplies were hauled in on horse-drawn wagons. The coming of spring put an end to the miseries of snow, but it brought high water and terrible mud as work began on the bridge. Still, the workers endured. The finished bridge had a length of 8,400 feet (1.6 miles). Smalley wrote that "six hundred feet of this structure runs across such deep water that piles from 90 to 100 feet in length are required."

Within a few years, Sandpoint became a rowdy, booming railroad town. In 1908, another long bridge was built over the lake to carry wagons and, eventually, cars. But the railroad bridge is Robinson's chosen image in the novel, perhaps because it recalls a time when a train pulling into town held any number of interesting possibilities in a lonely place, including escape.

First-Person Narration in *Housekeeping*

The first-person narrator of *Housekeeping* announces her identity in the first sentence of the novel: "My name is Ruth." Beginning this way suggests that identity is the primal force of the story. Everything we experience in the novel will be filtered through Ruth's senses, her thoughts and language.

Marilynne Robinson could have chosen a third-person narrator to tell the story: *Her name is Ruth. She grew up with her younger sister, Lucille, under the care of her grandmother....* But *Housekeeping* is, at its core, a novel of self-discovery. Beneath the novel's beautiful, grave sentences, mysterious characters, and wild landscapes, is Ruth's lone search for the answer to a question she defines for herself:

> When did I become so unlike other people? (p. 214).

First-person narration allows the story to belong entirely to Ruth. She alone has direct access to her inner experience. Ruth sees, hears, and thinks like a poet as she moves through the world, and first-person narration allows us to feel enveloped by her poetic consciousness, to experience her extraordinary inner voice directly:

> And there is no living creature, though the whims of eons had put its eyes on boggling stalks and clamped it in a carapace, diminished it to a pinpoint and given it a taste for mud and stuck it down a well or hid it under a stone, but that creature will live on if it can (p. 178).

"I hear a voice that I would say is not my voice," Robinson explains. "When I read *Housekeeping* out loud, I hear it over again in my mind. I'm very interested in the musicality of language."

In a variation on a traditional first-person voice, Ruth is able to narrate not only the events of her own lifetime, but some that occur before she was born. Describing the aftermath of the deadly train derailment, she is uncannily aware of visual details, knowing that "shivers flew when a swimmer surfaced, and the membrane of ice that formed where the ice was torn looked new, glassy, and black" (p. 8).

This narrative fluidity gives Ruth an expanded authority over matters of family history and raises interesting questions about memory and knowledge.

Commenting on this unusual narrative stance in an interview published in *Willow Springs*, Robinson says, "a lot of what I knew and a lot of what seemed important in my early life were descriptions of things I had not seen that had a profound reality in my imagination, because they were told among people whose importance to me is mythic, in the way that grandparents and aunts and uncles are to children. So I think there's a huge psychological latitude with the first-person because we have a much greater store of experience than what we actually witness."

Ruth's voice, more than any other aspect of the novel, creates its distinctive tone. First-person narration allows the reader to accompany her unhindered into a private world.

Family Dynamics in *Housekeeping*

Families in which nothing is ever discussed usually have a lot not to discuss.
—Mason Cooley

Families edit their histories. They tell some stories, but not others. And within stories they select certain details to include and others to avoid. In *Housekeeping*, the Foster family becomes a matriarchy by spectacular accident, but we soon learn that a certain ambivalence toward men is more than accidental. As readers, we have to wonder about Edmund and Sylvia's marriage when she views his death as an extension of his habit of disappearing. We wonder still more when Ruth describes how her grandfather once helped her grandmother over a puddle "with a wordless and impersonal courtesy that she did not resent because she had never really wished to feel married to anyone." After Edmund, no man occupies a place in the Foster family for long.

The serene and ordered life that follows for widowed Sylvia and her three daughters is missing something. Family silence surrounds the difficult subjects of abandonment and loss. Ruth describes an unspoken anxiety in the Foster girls, telling us that Molly, Helen, and Sylvie "hovered" and watched their mother; they "pressed her and touched her as if she had just returned after an absence." Yet these anxieties, along with grief for their father, are never voiced. "The disaster," Ruth says, "had fallen out of sight, like the train itself."

Sylvia's silence on the "big subjects" may be what hastens the departures of her grown daughters, which seem less like rites of passage and more like escapes. Or, could it be that the girls have inherited their father's tendency to disappear? Molly vanishes into "the Orient," Helen and Sylvie into marriages that don't last. (If Edmund is a ghost in the novel, then the estranged husbands of Helen and Sylvie are mere vapors.) "Our grandmother never spoke of any of her daughters," Ruth observes, "and when they were mentioned to her, she winced with irritation."

There is a family connection between Edmund's death and Helen's when she drives off a cliff into the same lake that took his life. But no one ever blurts out this astonishing association. It remains submerged, like the train, and Helen's borrowed car.

In Sylvie, the drifter, we see the family silence reveal itself in a new generation. Lucille, the youngest and angriest of her nieces, questions her insistently for family details, but her answers are vague, even impersonal. When Lucille asks why Sylvie never had children, she scolds: "You must know, Lucille … that some questions aren't polite. I'm sure that my mother must have told you that."

Could it be that Ruth's story is her response to family silence? In one sense, the novel is Ruth's piecing together the scattered scraps of memory and history into a real story at last, filling in the blanks with water and wind, the elements of her ancestral Fingerbone. As the Foster family may have known when they chose silence, there is sorrow in the telling. However, as Ruth observes, "What are all these fragments for, if not to be knit up finally?"

Teaching Resources

Books

Pinsker, Sanford. *Conversations with Contemporary American Writers*. Atlanta, GA: Editions Rodopi, 1985.

Conover, Ted. *Rolling Nowhere: Riding the Rails with America's Hoboes*. New York: Vintage Books, 2001.

Works by Marilynne Robinson

Fiction

Housekeeping (1980)

Gilead (2004)

Home (2008)

Nonfiction

Mother Country: Britain, the Welfare State, and Nuclear Pollution (1989)

The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought (1998)

Books that include essays by Marilynne Robinson

Abernethy, Bob, and William Bole. *The Life of Meaning: Reflections on Faith, Doubt, and Repairing the World.* New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007.

Thornton, John F., and Susan B. Varenne, eds. *John Calvin: Steward of God's Covenant: Selected Writings*. Preface by Marilynne Robinson. New York: Vintage, 2006.

Web sites

www.bonnercountyhistory.org
Bonner County Historical Society. This site contains articles and stories about Bonner County, Idaho, including the town of Sandpoint.

www.sandpointonline.com/sandpointmag/sms01/centennial.htm
Sandpoint Magazine. "100 Years of Memories." The site contains oral interviews with Sandpoint, Idaho, residents on topics of local history from 1901 to the present day.

www.washington.edu/uwired/outreach/cspn/Website/index.html
Center for the Study of the Pacific Northwest. Information and curriculum packets on Pacific Northwest history, culture, and literature, including an essay, "My Western Roots," by Marilynne Robinson, are included on this Web site.

content.lib.washington.edu/kinseyweb/index.html
A collection of selected images by Darius Kinsey, the most important photographer of logging in the Pacific Northwest. The University of Washington Libraries' collection illustrates logging and lumbering from the turn of the century until the 1940s.

willowsprings.ewu.edu/interviews/robinson.html
Willow Springs. Includes an interview with Marilynne Robinson conducted by Sarah Flynn, Thomas King, and Adam O'Connor Rodriguez on April 24, 2006.

NCTE Standards

National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Standards[*]

1. Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.
7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.
8. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.
9. Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.
10. Students whose first language is not English make use of their first language to develop competency in the English language arts and to develop understanding of content across the curriculum.
11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literary communities.
12. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

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[*] This guide was developed with NCTE Standards and State Language Arts Standards in mind. Use these standards to guide and develop your application of the curriculum.

"I have spent my life watching, not to see beyond the world, merely to see, great mystery, what is plainly before my eyes."

—MARILYNNE ROBINSON
from *The Death of Adam*

> “For even things lost
> in a house abide, like
> forgotten sorrows and
> incipient dreams.”
>
> —MARILYNNE ROBINSON
>
> from *Housekeeping*

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THE BIG READ

The Big Read is an initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts designed to restore reading to the center of American culture. The NEA presents The Big Read in partnership with the Institute of Museum and Library Services and in cooperation with Arts Midwest.

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